

Gallup VA clinic swept up in national infrastructure overhaul

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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Opened in 2015; slated to close in 2026

About 2,000 military veterans rely on Gallup's VA clinic as their first point of contact for health care. They aren't happy that the clinic is on the chopping block as part of a national effort to

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rebalance veterans' health services and infrastructure.

New Mexico has eight VA community-based outpatient clinics. Four are slated for closure: Gallup, Las Vegas, Raton and Espanola. All together, they serve a little under 5,000 veterans.

Without the clinic, Gallup veterans who aren't eligible for services from IHS will have to go to Albuquerque for primary care, Dave Cuellar, head of Veterans Helping Veterans, said. Many older veterans are unable to drive, and it can take months to get reimbursed for transportation costs.

"Not everyone who is a veteran in Gallup can drive to Albuquerque," he said, and even those who are physically able may be financially strapped. "They get a per diem. It used to be cash when they got to Albuquerque. Now they put it in your benefits check and it takes five or six months."

The committee doing the evaluation for the VA relied on use data from 2019 through 2021, when the VA closed all of its CBOCs nationwide, he said. "They themselves should know that these clinics were closed, because they closed them."

Veterans Helping Veterans is hosting a series of town hall meetings about the closure. The last one on May 13 hosted Rep. Teresa Leger-Fernandez and New Mexico Department of Veterans Services Secretary Sonya Smith.

The featured guest for the next session May 31 will be Sen. Ben Ray Lujan. That meeting will be at 1 pm at the UNM-Gallup Conference Center. Cuellar said there will be a panel discussion with open mic for veterans to address Lujan and other panelists directly.

"In [2015] we were at the grand opening of this clinic," City Councilor Fran Palochak, Dist. 4, said. "Many of our vets are older and they can't drive to Albuquerque any more. We need to improve this clinic rather than close it."

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The looming closure is part of a planned nationwide shakeup that will shutter or reconstruct 35 Veterans Affairs medical clinics across 21 states, and add 14 new major VA hospitals.

Will New Mexico get a new hospital? Not at this juncture. The closest will be Colorado Springs, Colo., and Anthem, Ariz.

“We will be shifting toward new infrastructure or different infrastructure that accounts for how healthcare has changed, matches the needs of that market, and strengthens our research and education missions,” VA Secretary Denis McDonough said before releasing the plan in March.

Like anything else in government, it won’t happen overnight. Closures are expected to take effect in 2026. In the meantime, there will be public hearings and committee meetings, and local advocates hope they may yet save the clinic here. Mayor Louie Bonaguidi is urging residents not to be fooled by the long timeline.

“When they decommissioned Fort Wingate, we sat back and said, ‘We have to do something, we’ve got to stop this.’ After it was over with we licked our wounds and couldn’t figure out what we did wrong,” he said.

When Cannon Air Force Base faced closure during the base realignment commission in 2005, he noted, “the outcry was unbelievable,” with daily news coverage and letters to editors and local officials that he credited with saving that base.

“That’s when we realized our mistake was we didn’t make enough of an outcry,” Bonaguidi said. “If you get a chance, write a letter to the editor. Better yet, write to your congressman. Write to us. Just make sure it’s a point we’ve got to get across.”

Opposition to the clinic closure is also shining a light on other issues in the VA health care system.

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“One of the other things I’m not sure we are talking about is that the VA has also recommended that we move PTSD services from Albuquerque to Phoenix,” Smith said. “We need to make sure that PTSD services stay in our state and more are offered.”

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